

STALKING THE SHERIFF



BY BAILEY MILLARD

and would be safely celled and guarded for over half a score of years, no matter how well he behaved or what credits he received. To be sure, Pearl Bassett, the comely sister of the superintendent of the Bar X, kept the Sheriff at arm's length and farther. But Pearl would "come around" in time. He would marry her and go back to his old home in the Oregon woods, for which he had hankered at times. It would be better for them there. For he had made some bad breaks as Sheriff, among them the Shorty Regan one. Public sympathy was with Shorty, and more than one miner and cowpuncher suspected the truth as to

what Steve MacFarland had encompassed in that case. Indeed, Jake Stewart, a firm friend of Shorty's, had determined to have him pardoned, and had worked hard to that end. Failing in this, he had gone to Yuma and was quietly seeing what could be done to help Shorty escape from prison. He visited him several times in his cell and once sneaked in a small saw; but it was found under the prisoner's mattress by a turnkey, and Shorty lost so many credits that he might have to serve his full term.

Still, he was liked by the warden and by all the guards. A certain fastidiousness, uncommon in cowboys, that had made them call him Tidy Regan sometimes on the ranch, still manifested itself with him, because it was inborn. His cell was the neatest in the whole prison. His cot was nicely made up, and his rough prison garb was well cared for. He kept himself as clean as the prison facilities would permit, and though his thick dark hair was kept at the regulation shortness he managed to part it in the middle by careful combing, which made the other convicts jeer and gibe at him.

Fastidious men are likely to be men of imagination. Shorty had much more of the latter trait than the average cowpuncher. He had what might be called a precipitative mind. Night after night, as he sat on his cot with his head resting on his hands, the gray blank wall before him was alive with pictures. Suddenly there would leap forth from it, with all the intensity of a calcium projected film, the sharp outlines of the big Sheriff's easygoing figure passing over to Munda's bar at the invitation of that odious satellite, Soapy Shaw. Munda would grin, wait expectantly, and then take down a bottle. The Sheriff would pour the red liquor into his glass and raise it to his lips. Of a sudden he would turn, white faced and faltering. The man who watched the picture could feel the trigger click back under his finger and the acrid blue smoke sting his nostrils as the bulky form before him threw up his hand and dropped his glass while he sprawled back upon the sanded floor.

Again the dull wall would blaze with the picture of the main street of Gonzales,—the dusty, dilapidated, fake-front stores and saloons. Here came MacFarland on his roan mare, smiling, urbane, sure of himself. The Sheriff lifted his hand to stroke his beard.

"This is the time I git you!" rang the wild, exultant cry.

Again the pallor, the quick, scared look in the eye, again the quick pull at the trigger, the toppling and crumpling up of the big form, and the headlong plunge from the saddle into the dust.

Another picture—and this the most intensely luminous of all. It was out in a wild, rocky cañon. The Sheriff was camping on the trail of an outlaw. He was lying asleep in his blankets, his horse tethered nearby. The moon was playing down on his red-bearded face. Of a sudden there was a cry, "Wake up there!" MacFarland sprang up quickly and clutched his gun.

"I've got you!" yelled the avenger—the bullet sped, and the Sheriff fell back into a sounder sleep than that from which he had been so rudely awakened.

Shorty Regan loved to dwell upon these pictures. Over and over they would appear upon the wall, and



The Sheriff Lay as One Dead in the Shadow of the Rock.

LOOK a here, Steve!" The short, black-haired man whom big, bland Sheriff MacFarland had just turned over to the warden of Yuma Penitentiary reached forth a beckoning hand through the bars.

"What is it, Shorty?" mildly remonstrated the Sheriff, who had no relish for these last interviews with his prisoners.

"Only this," came back the low, throaty, slow-drawn tones of the newly immured man, while his black eyes blazed in vengeful intensity. "You know how I got in here, Steve MacFarland. You know I didn't lift a finger in that fight at Gonzales. You know it was Buck Presley that shot up Joe Randall; that I didn't have a gun on me at the time. But it suited you to make me the goat and git me cinched to the limit—fifteen years in this hell-hole. If Joe had died, I'd been put out too. An' you know that I know what you done it for. Jest on account o' Pearl Bassett, who'll never marry you in God's world, cause she's onto yer game with both feet—you see if she ain't! Puttin' me in here ain't goin' to help you any with her."

"Oh, say, Shorty," cried the Sheriff with a wince, quickly followed by a forced smile, "yer away off. I wasn't the only one to swear that you—"

"I know you wasn't: you fixed it up with that Greaser crowd, an' you wouldn't a done it only to queer me forever with Pearl. We was all right good pals till she blew into camp, wasn't we?"

"Sure," affirmed MacFarland.

"As good pals as the 'ever was on the Bar X," went on the prisoner. "Used to drink out o' the same bottle, and I helped you out when you run for Sheriff. It was a close scratch. If you hadn't got them twelve votes I swung for you, you'd be back there on the range punchin' cattle now."

"I guess that's right," admitted the Sheriff; "but—"

"O' course it's right; an' I want to tell you again that yer as snaky as an Apache—to put up that dirty job an' run me in here. An' I give notice right here that I'm a goin' to live to do the fandango on your grave, that's what I am!" The prisoner's knuckles rapped sharply on the grating and his eyes blazed again. "Just as soon as they let me out o' here I'm a goin' to git you! I'm a goin' to pump you so full o' lead they'll have to git an extry pallbearer to carry you!"

The Sheriff winced again. It was hard work this time to break off the wince with a smile; but he did it. "Oh, they all talk that way," he said half to himself.

"I s'pose they do," sneered the man behind the bars; "but this one means it. You took good care to see I was landed here all right. You wouldn't send me down with a deputy. You wanted to— Oh, Steve!" A sudden wave of self pity swept over the wretched man, and he choked and groaned. Then his eyes stabbed forth again and he clutched the bars. "I'll git you—I'll git you!" he repeated.

And the Sheriff turned away and marched out to the pleasant tune of "I'll git you!"

BUT in the course of the next year or two the haunting words haunted no more. The ghost was laid by the serene reflection that Shorty Regan was safely celled

over and over again they would repeat themselves in his dreams. And always at the end of it there would be the grim satisfaction of a gap filled up, of uneven scales balanced, of a long-standing account fully audited and squared.

ONE day Jake Stewart came to see him in his cell, when a group of pious sisters from the convent passed before the iron door, looked in pityingly, and passed on. That gave Jake an idea. Two weeks later a dozen nuns visited the prison, on their errands of mercy. Nobody counted them when they departed toward evening through the gates. If they had done so, it would have been discovered that the twelve women had mysteriously extended their number to thirteen, and if the veil had been stripped from the face of that dumpy one that lingered a little behind the rest Shorty Regan would have slept that night in the dark cell and would have remained there on bread and water for two weeks or more. But nobody counted the nuns, and so Shorty passed outside the gates safely.

It was Jake's horse that stood ready in the dark alley into which the escaped prisoner quietly dodged after turning the first corner in town; it was Jake's hand that seized his hand and helped to disrobe him and put him into the new store suit and thrust the slouch hat upon his head, and it was Jake's voice that breathed urgently though low, "Now, Shorty, beat it!" Then there was a clatter of hoofs down the street and out upon the dusty highway through the dark night, and Shorty Regan was free. How good was the sweet, cool air as it fanned his face and hummed in his ears; how good was the silent, open road stretching before him; and, best of all, how good was the thought that he was speeding toward Gonzales and revenge!

It was a two days' ride to Gonzales, a long, hard ride over the desert; but he knew the way, and he knew enough to sleep by day and ride by night. Four of the five convicts that had escaped during his two years of prison had been captured and brought back. He would not risk capture before he got the Sheriff. After that it didn't matter much what happened. But he must see Pearl Bassett before he did his work of revenge. He must see her while his hands were yet clear of blood. So he headed straight for the Bar X Ranch, three miles to the east of Gonzales. But before he did this he must shave and clean himself up.

Jake had left gold and silver in the pockets of the suit he had provided for him; but it would hardly do to venture into a barber shop. There was a little store and roadhouse on the edge of Gonzales, just before you crossed the bridge. Hank Winslow, the storekeeper, knew Shorty Regan very well, and he would have been glad to take him in, feed him, and let him shave and wash up; but it was not to be risked, on account of the others who might be hanging about. Hank wouldn't care a cent if he broke in and helped himself, especially if he left money to cover the damage.

And so it came to pass that Shorty, in camp at a waterhole near Bar X next morning, was able to wield a new razor while he looked at his lathered face in a little round mirror stuck up on a rock, and also to use a